

## COMMUNITY BASED LEARNING AS A LINK BETWEEN TEACHING AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY AT BAN LAU

(SUE KOK, UBON, THAILAND)

METEE KANSA<sup>1</sup> & SURASAK WITON<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand

<sup>2</sup>Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand

### ABSTRACT

*In summer 2014, the researchers launched a Community-Based Learning (CBL) research for the 1421330 Linguistics and Language Use, a compulsory course for English Majors at Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand. The primary aim was to find how CBL worked for English teaching. A bigger aim, however, was to bridge teaching and community service and or development. A three-day and two night stay in a village was planned as a main activity for the course. Students' performance and their attitudes were investigated. At the same time, a record of observation and informal interview were planned to find some noticeable changes and links between having teaching activities in the village and community development.*

*Based on their scores, all 13 students who did not do well in the past enrolment performed significantly much better ( $p < 0.05$ ) while the other 3 students who took the course for the first time also did well and gained grade C and above. In addition, all 16 students said that they learned about real life and had firsthand experience which could not be taught by texts or even teachers. Meanwhile, villagers participating in the activity also said they had an opportunity to understand their children and see or hear more of the world outside the community. As far as community development is concerned, there are good signs for future progress. First, 100 % of the interviewees said the activities could encourage community development and they preferred to see more of the CBL projects in the village. In addition, the CBL project produced more key local personnel for future projects. For instance, there were local personnel who were willing to help teach music, drawing, agriculture, and weaving respectively. Another concrete evidence of improvement was from local helpers who helped coordinate the projects. They got work done faster and also became confident enough to take more responsibility including interviewing about 70 fellow villagers after the CBL was done. Based on the results from this study, CBL was a good link for future community developing projects.*

**KEYWORDS:** Real Life, Opportunity, Encourage Community, Music, Drawing, Agriculture

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### INTRODUCTION

This report discussed procedure and results from a classroom based research conducted when the researcher taught a linguistic course (1421330 Linguistics and Language in Use) at Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand in June 2015. The course was opened for students who needed to take some courses during summer for different reasons.

For instance, some students had to repeat the course to have a better grade to meet the requirements of their major; others decided to take summer course so that they would have fewer courses to learn during regular semesters.

As there was a potential that there would be a number of students who could not do well when they first took the course would reenroll in this course, the researcher planned to change or adapt the lesson plan of the course. Based on the fact that education is to prepare people for real life and real community, the researcher believes that the more students learn from real community, the better could be expected. Therefore, the researcher decided to employ Community Based Learning (CBL) to the class. The target community was Ban Lau Sue Kok, the researcher's home town village where the researcher had initiated different service and research projects for over 10 years. It was also the researcher's interest to combine teaching English with rural empowering; it is a win-win plan because students can learn about language use and how people in a village live while villagers can also learn from the students. In addition, having students communicate with villagers might lead to a new interesting research topic as well (Grounded Theory, Glaser G [1]).

The researcher would like to find whether learning in real environment would help students understand the subject contents better and in turn get a better grade. It was also interesting what the students' attitudes toward CBL would be like. The last but not least was to encourage more cooperation in community development. In other words, how CBL could lead to rural development was additional purpose.

## OBJECTIVES

- To provide opportunities for students to experience rural village life.
- To help students understand different concepts in sociolinguistics from direct Experience.
- To find some clues to relate teaching English and rural or community development.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Can community based learning or learning from direct experience help the students do better (gain a better grade) in a sociolinguistics course?
- What are the students' attitudes toward community based learning?
- Are there any convincing evidences that CBL supports rural development?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Thai Education and Community Development

Like other countries, Fry G. [2] pointed out that Thai educational system was influenced by both Thai culture and politics. The authority tried to improve the system to make it work better for the country. Educational reform has been made. However, education and human resource development is still a big challenge in Thailand. On the other hand, community contribution in education and development is encouraged. Communities with successful projects were introduced and promoted. Jintawee [3] studied the use of cooperation in rural communities and revealed what and how the communities were developed. For example, she studied Ban Jumrung Community, a community selected as a best practice model village. She summarized 10 steps the former village head's developing strategies used as follows:

- Finding core leaders

- Inspiring ideas
- Studying community background
- Surveying information
- Analyzing data
- Drafting a master plan
- Conducting public debate
- Launching the plan
- Reviewing and
- Evaluating

As the majority of Thai students are from Buddhist background and Buddhism more or less plays some roles in Thai daily lives as well as in education, Buddhist temples or monasteries functioned like schools for Thai in the past, and in fact there are still a few schools in Thai temples nowadays. Therefore, some ideas from relevant texts were reviewed. Rahula W.[4 p.1] stated that according to Buddhism “One is one’s own refuge”. This is consistent with a saying like “Help yourself before asking God or others to help you”. In other words, one of the educational goals in Thai culture is to train students to be independent. In addition, Payotoo P. [5] suggested that to educate or to prepare students, social problems or what really happen in the society should also be studied. Talking about the link between education and community development, Bhola H. [6] pointed out that in order to make some change or development in both rural and urban communities, educational transformation is needed.

### **Community-Based Learning and English Teaching**

Language learning and teaching is important in development because language is a mean for communication and communication is vital for development [Khaewtep K. 7]. And because English has been used in international communication different teaching approaches were introduced and developed [Nunan D. 8]. However, since the world keeps changing and so do people or language users, it is hard to find one best teaching approach for everyone in every context.

Despite the fact that English has become a widely used international language [Hammer J.9], it is still a problem for many Thai students. Their English competence still needs improvement [Rattanayart W. 10]. This is true even with some English major students. English teachers in Thailand and other countries where English is a foreign language, therefore, have to look for new activities to motivate and help students learn better.

Since community development and empowering villagers is the researchers’ interest, research involving villages were emphasized. Next was the studies the researchers reviewed. Okayama M. & Kajii E. [11] conducted a survey on medical students’ attitudes and motivations concerning community-based education. They found that 80% of the participants were confident and had positive attitudes toward practicing community health care.

Guerrero M. [12] pointed out that many college students “are unaware of cultural differences and social issues in their communities...” and some teachers seldom tried to link the classroom contents to real life use. In his article

“Teaching Through Community-Based Projects” he summarized that students would acquire different skills from a Community-Based Project. For example, they learn how to work as a team. Working together with friends help them have interpersonal skills or how to work with others. They have more critical thinking than only studying in class. In addition, doing some activities in a community can teach them to be less selfish and care more about others. This is possible as villagers in rural areas usually know and help each others. For instance, they share the food they cook or trade what one family has with something they lack.

Guerrero [12] also distinguishes community project from field trip projects. He explained that students have to do certain things in Community-Based project, but students usually do not have to really do anything but observation in Fieldtrip.

Both Perlin [13] and Guerrero [12] emphasize that contextualization is very important for learning and teaching. The teacher should try to link the lesson or academic contents to real life. This would help students to have first hand experience which would in turn help them understand the lessons faster.

Some studies directly discussed community development were also found. For instance, Cooper E. [14] also supports incorporating community related projects into teacher-preparing programs. He claims that community related projects not only helps students learn the contents of the course, but also encourages better relationship between the teacher and students. This is because both teacher and students would have more time to work together so that they would learn more about each other. Similar idea was repeated by Bodorkos B. [15] when she reported on conducting a participatory action research (PAR) to encourage cooperation between a university and the community in Hungary. She claims that university-community partnership leads to other cooperation and sustainable development.

Based on the information from previous studies, community-based learning sounded helpful for both teaching work at Ubon RatChathani University and having some contribution on rural development or villager empowering. Including a CBL project in the lesson plan not only adding new activity to the course, but also would encourage students to link the lessons to real community. This fits the course objective; to learn how language is used in real communication. It could also benefit both students and adults in the village as they could learn from meeting student visitors too. As the society is changing because of technology and development, villagers need to update their knowledge and perception. Everybody needs to be alert and keep oneself updated in order not to be left behind [Jintawee K. 16].

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Procedure**

This paragraph discusses how research questions would be answered. In order to answer the first research question, the students' old grade or the grade they got when they took the course before repeating was compared with the grade they got in this semester. Students' diaries and teacher's note plus students' feedback or comments after finishing the course would reveal students' attitudes. How the researcher ran the activity was discussed next. The teacher also recorded changes or development seen on local helpers in the project. Additional questions like whether there was any link or connection between having students come and learn in the village and community development were also prepared for informal interview a week after the teaching. The following paragraph presents the procedure or how the research was conducted.

Before the semester began, the researcher had a meeting with students who were interested to take the course in

summer 2015 to inform them about the activity and purposes. The students were informed that apart from studying in class on campus, we would spend 2 nights in a village (Ban Lau Sue Kok) and collect data there. The researcher explained to them what activities they would have to do so that they could decide whether they would or would not take the course. Some examples of activities were given. For instance, the students would be assigned to observe language use in the village, and they would keep a diary recording what they did and learned during the stay in the village. Sixteen students, 12 females and 2 males enrolled for the course. Among 16 students who enrolled, 13 students used to take the course but they either failed or got grade D, so they repeated the course. Originally, all 16 students were supposed to go to Ban Lua Sue Kok and collect data from the same village. However, one student could not come the day we set for the project. Nevertheless, she was assigned to collect linguistic data from her village instead.

The class went to the village the third week after the semester started. Before that, the researcher contacted the villagers who could host students. Ten families agreed to take some students to stay with them. However, all 15 students camped at the researcher's place in the village in the first night for orientation and plenary activities such as sharing what they observed or learned during the day, and learning varieties of English from a movie at night.

The next day, the students were assigned to interview villagers and observe language use in the village. They reported and shared what they got from the survey and interview. Then the students were divided into 10 groups (5 groups of one and five groups of two) to spend a night with 10 host families. Five students went to stay with 5 different families while the rest 10 students went to the rest 5 families.

All the students met again next morning. They shared and discussed the experience staying with a family in the village. For example, they talked about the activities and they observed to the lessons. For example, how many dialects were used in the village or whether they heard any words they did not understand or whether there was any code-switching happened while they talked.

Each student got feedback and suggestions from the teacher. Then they were asked to give some comments on the activity (staying and learning in a community) by writing their comments on a piece of paper before they left. They were told not to write their name on the paper so that the teacher would get real comments from most students.

## **Data Analysis**

After the final examination, the students were graded. Their old scores and grades were compared with the ones they got this semester using t-test. Students were asked to write what they thought about the experience staying in the village; whether they think the activity help them understand the lessons better and what they gained from the activity (CBL). The students' comments then were summarized to answer the second research question. The informal interview plus the teacher note were used to reveal whether CBL led to any sign of possible development. By using 10 stages of the village head's developing stages summarized by Jintawee K.[3] as a guide line, how much CBL could link to rural development would be evidenced.

## **RESULTS**

### **Grades**

Students' grades showed that most students who repeated the course got better grades than the previous time they took the course. The three new students also did quite well and nobody in the class got lower than 60 from the total 100.

The grades and raw scores can be presented in tables 1 and 2 next:

**Table 1: Students' Grades from the Past and the New Grades from this Semester**

Fix-Rate	Student No.	Total Scores and Grades The Last Time Taking The Course		Total Scores and Grades this Semester (with CBL)		t-Test Results	
		Score	Grade	Score	Grade	T value	P value
A = 79.5 up	1	57	D+	70	B	-9.97	0.0001
B+ = 74.5	2	58	D+	79	B+		
B = 69.5	3	50	D	67	C+		
C+ = 64.5	4	53	D	66	C+		
C = 59.5	5	47	F	66	C+		
D+ = 54.5	6	48	F	66	C+		
D = 49.5	7	47	F	70	B		
F = < 49.5	8	46	F	66	C+		
	9	53	D	64	C		
	10	54	D	67	C+		
	11	55	D+	73	B		
	12	56	D+	76	B+		
	13	56	D+	73	B		
<b>Mean</b>		<b>53</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>69.5</b>	<b>B</b>		

As can be seen from the table, all students scored significantly better after studying with the CBL activities compared with their performance in the past when they previously took the course and got grade below C or scored fewer than 59.5.

**Table 2: Score and Grade of Students Who Took the Course for the First Time**

Fix-Rate	Student No.	Total Score and grade this semester (with CBL)		Remark
		Score	Grade	
A = 79.5 up	14	63	C	
B+ = 74.5	15	66	C+	
B = 69.5	16	71	B	
C+ = 64.5				
C = 59.5				
D+ = 54.5				
D = 49.5				
F = < 49.5				

### Attitudes

The students were asked to write their feedback or comments what they thought about CBL; whether they think it was helpful for them or not, and what they would suggest to make the lesson more pleasant for learners.

It was found that all of them thought the activity was helpful and they had learned different things that they could never learn in class. For example, they learned some old vocabulary used by elders, and that helped them understand the concept of "language change" more clearly. In addition, they liked some activities such as finding mushrooms in the woods and teaching kids in the village. However, they suggested that students stay with the host more than 1 night.

### CBL and Rural Development

When compared before and after employing CBL, it was positive that teaching or conducting a new project in the

village could be more fruitful. The following was what was new:

There were new local volunteers to help with future projects. For example, there are people who could help teach drawing, agriculture, weaving, and music

- There were at least 10 families willing to host students.
- A weaving group was formed and started to dye and weave cloth.

In other words, it could be said that more network was formed. In addition, the answers to the formal interview were 100 % positive. All 70 people randomly asked said that having the students stay and do some activities in the village led to some development in the village. At least it made villagers become alert; Young students got a chance to learn from visitors, and a few villagers sensed the need to keep the village clean to avoid losing face. To the question whether they could think of any negative consequences, 94% or 66 out of 70 said none. Even the 4 people who voiced that the activities could lead to something negative such as there might be some misunderstanding between visitors and villagers because of the different background or young people might expose themselves to bad habits like drinking or playing games, all of them showed uncertainty like might or may be.

There were about 10 local people who occasionally helped the researcher with community projects. About 4-5 people came quite regularly. All 4-5 people who helped while running CBL teaching were very active. They participated in taking students to the woods to find wild mushroom or leading them to the market. In addition to that, two of them help interview villagers a week after the CBL teaching was done.

By matching the data or the above evidences, the researchers agreed that employing CBL in teaching could pave ways to rural development as CBL covered many developing stages set by the former head of a model village as summarized by Jintawee K.[3] and discussed in literature review section. Nevertheless, this will be further discussed again in next section.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

The results of employing CBL in a lesson plan of the course is significant because most of the students taken the course did not do well in the course when they first took the subject but the group did well after participating in CBL activity. In fact, one student in the group had studied the course 2 times already, but she failed twice. However, she scored 66 this time. It might be argued that this student did better because she had taken the course many times, the three new students also got grade B and C. Moreover, **none** got lower than 60 out of 100. Therefore, CBL must have some contribution in the students' learning.

One good point of CBL that positively affected students' performance could be the new environment and time. Staying in the village is staying in a new environment. As a result, the students were keen to know about the new environment. They were excited to meet and talk with people who they had never met before. Staying in a village is also staying away from other distractions like loud traffic or entertainment places. Moreover, there were different academic tasks that they had to finish while staying in the village so that they had to keep active. Some of the activities were also group work. The students had to work as team. This meant that they could not be idle or else the group would not be able to finish the tasks. In addition, the students and the teacher had more time to talk. The teacher also gave feedback individually. Students had more time to concentrate on the contents and they could ask the teacher anytime they needed

helps. These are possible factors that enable the students to do well in the course.

Students have good attitudes towards CBL because they had learned something. They had digested what they heard or saw in the village, something that they were unlikely to do when studying in class or on campus because of time constraint and distractions. The students felt good when they understood the lessons. Sharing experiences and reflecting on shared linguistic data also made the learning lessons meaningful. With some help from friends and the teachers students could relate the contents to reality. Doing that enables students to have a long term memory because it is about their life or experiences, not just a piece of unrelated data.

A few students also pointed out the similarities and differences between Lau Sue Kok and their villages. This meant that CBL has encouraged students to think about their home. Therefore, CBL can have some impact on young people, and perhaps encourage them to go back to where they came from and help empower their fellow people when they graduate. That is a purpose of education, to help people to learn to be independent and later help others who are less independent.

### **CBL as a Link to Rural Development**

To elaborate how CBL fits rural development strategies the 10 stages for community developing of former Jumrung Village head cited by Jintawee K.[3] is presented again as follows:

- Finding core leaders
- Inspiring ideas
- Studying community background
- Surveying information
- Analyzing data
- Drafting a master plan
- Conducting public debate
- Launching the plan
- Reviewing and
- Evaluating

Without intention to imitate the 10 stages of the village head, the researchers had employed almost every stage presented above. For instance, core leaders were found, the villagers were willing to participate and suggested the researcher organize a similar project. We have done some debating before taking some actions or some activities like taking students to the woods to find wild mushrooms or survey language use in the village, and also what to ask students to teach young kids. What we did were reviewed and evaluated together in an open discussion as a lesson for all to reflect on or learn from. The only difference is the scale of the work. However, as people say “Well begun is half done”, when CBL at the village led to participants’ satisfaction and everybody gained some learning and are happy to learn more, the path to development is already widely opened. Therefore, we, the researchers of this CBL project would say that we are very positive to do more of similar CBL research as our contribution to community.



## CONCLUSIONS

Both data from students' grades and comments showed that CBL or learning in a real community is a good option for teaching. The students enjoyed the activities and did better in the examination. They learned to observe how people used varieties of languages in communication. Seeing and hearing how people talked helped them learn to relate the academic contents to real use. In addition, having students spend a few days in a community is in fact preparing students for the future task. This is because not all graduates will get a job in town. On the contrary, many graduates will have to work in the country. Having once stayed in a village and socialized with villagers should therefore prepare them for the future work. Most of all, the results all indicate that with this kind of teaching activities, teachers can do more for his or her community.

## LIMITATIONS

Before a teacher can leave students with a villager's family, the teacher should know about the students and the host to be so that he or she can match right students with the right host. Then they would get along well and can really learn from each other. However, in this study, the researcher got all the names of students who enrolled for the course when the term had begun. As a result, there was time constraint to talk to both students and villager hosts. Fortunately, this research was conducted in the researcher's hometown where the teacher already had some connections. That makes this research slightly different from other CBL project which was normally run in other communities. The results from this study was from a case study; they can be either the same or different in other contexts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study support previous studies that CBL has some advantages in

Teaching and development: As discussed above CBL activity helps participants to have creative thinking and learn to work as a team, CBL can be adapted to almost all subjects. This meant that a scientific project, historical survey, architectural or even religious or philosophical study can take place in any community. It is interesting then, to see a research on CLB and other subjects besides English. However, to conduct a research on CBL, a researcher needs to plan well in advance. For example, the researcher will have to select the target community for the subject. Which community will be best depends on what the purposes are and how much the community fits the set purposes. In addition to that, to conduct a CBL project, a local coordinator is also recommended.

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